New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

Volume XVI, Number 6 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of February 28, 1955

1955 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years
Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

Stage Play	1954 Vol.	*Page*
*Anastasia		192
*Anniversary Waltz		339
*Bad Seed (The)		223
*Boy Friend (The)		299
Caine Mutiny Court Martial (The)		382
Dear Charles		316
*Fanny		256
*Flowering Peach (The)		196
*House of Flowers		189
*Lunatics and Lovers		219
Mrs. Patterson		231
*Pajama Game (The)		324
Peter Pan		273
*Quadrille		259
Rainmaker (The)		264
Reclining Figure		294
*Saint of Bleecker Street (The)		199
Sandhog		239
Tender Trap (The)		282
Wedding Breakfast		243
What Every Woman Knows		208
*Witness for the Prosecution		216
	1953 Vol.	
*Can-Can		304
*Kismet		198
Solid Gold Cadillac (The)		222
*Tea and Sympathy		266
*Teahouse of the August Moon (The)		254
	1952 Vol.	
*Seven Year Itch (The)		186
	1951 Vol.	
Fourposter (The)		190

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 28, 1955*

1955 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1955

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
*Dark Is Light Enough (The)	357
*Desperate Hours (The)	370
Doctor's Dilemma (The)	397
Festival	393
Grand Prize (The)	385
*Plain and Fancy	382
*Silk Stockings	354
*Southwest Corner (The)	374
Time of Your Life (The)	390
*Tonight in Samarkand	365
*Wayward Saint (The)	362
Wisteria Trees (The)	377

Theatre Openings
"The Dark Is Light Enough"
"Silk Stockings"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 28, 1955*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Silk Stockings"

Daily Mirror

February 25, 1955

'Silk Stockings,' Newest Musical, Is a Delight

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Cy Feuer and Ernie Martin are still batting 1,000. And the amazing thing about it is that they have socked a homer every time at the plate. Five solid hits in five times up. "Silk Stockings," their latest four-bagger, arrived at the Imperial Theatre Thursday evening, joining such current F&M round-trippers on Broadway as "Can-Can" and "The Boy Friend."

"SILK STOCKINGS" is a saucy, sexy, satiric saturnalia. Based on Melchior Lengyel's "Ninotchka," it kids the pants off of Communism. George S. Kaufman, Leueen MacGrath and Abe Burrows, who did the book, have used their slapstick with devastating effect on the Comrades. It would even make Bulganin laugh, if he had a sense of humor.

The song-and-dancer has to do with a serious-minded, statistics-ridden woman Commissar who goes to Paris to bring back a wavering composer of highbrow music, only to be just as beguiled by romance, luxury, jazz, freedom and other such capitalist corruptions as the composer had been. Being a woman, beneath her stern exterior, she has a fling with a breezy American theatrical agent.

When it looks as though he will carry her off to New York and Hollywood, duty impels her to return to Moscow with her charge. But having tasted liberty and the good things of life, it's inevitable that she will discover a way to escape to America and enjoy them again.

HILDEGARDE NEFF is a charming Ninotchka, looking more than a little like the Garbo, who did the role in the movies. Don Ameche has quit impersonating such worthies as Alexander Graham Bell to romp ingratiatingly as the handsome and persuasive 20 percenter. He has an excellent voice, and does justice to several of the more sensuous **and starry-eyed of the Cole Porter songs.**

Gretchen Wyler, as a film star deafened by battering the waves in a flock of aquatic extravaganzas, is riotously amusing. Her impression of a not-very-bright but extremely voluptuous luminary turning "War and Peace" into a strip-teasy "Josephine" is one of this or any season's joys.

Bows are also due Leon Belasco, Henry Lascoe, David Opatoshu, Philip Sterling and George Tobias in other roles.

JO MIELZINER has contributed lavish sets, Lucina Ballard and Robert Mackintosh resplendent costumes, and Don Walker arrangements of Porter chansons that fall easily on the ears. Producer Feuer, doubling in brass as director, has capitalized effectively on this salute to capitalism.

A late final curtain and an onrushing deadline prevent our telling you much more about "Silk Stockings." But, briefly, it's brash, tuneful and immensely funny. It moves like a rocket bent on reaching the moon in a hurry, and is calculated to make you roar with laughter and bring pain to the Comrades where it will hurt most.

You'd better rush to the Imperial box-office right away if you want to relish it in the near future. For tickets to this wonderful laugh champ are going to be as hard to come by as ducats for the next World Series. Don't miss this delight. The town's newest musical magnet!

"SILK STOCKINGS"

Musical comedy with music and lyrics by Cole Porter; book by George S. Kaufman, Leueen MacGrath and Abe Burrows; suggested by Melchior Lengyel's "Ninotchka;" staged by Cy Feuer; settings and lighting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; additional costumes by Robert Mackintosh; musical direction and vocal arrangements by Herbert Greene; orchestrations by Don Walker; dances and musical numbers staged by Eugene Loring; presented by Feuer and Martin at the Imperial Theatre, February 24, 1955. The cast:

Peter Ilyitch Boroff.....Philip Sterling
Hotel Doorman....Walter Kelvin
Flower Girl...Geraldine Delaney
Ivanov.....Henry Lascoe
Brankov.....Leon Belasco
Bibinski.....David Opatoshu
Steve Canfield.....Don Ameche
Guards.....Lee Barry and Dick Humphrey
Vera.....Julie Newmar
Commissar Markovitch.....George Tobias
Choreographer..Kenneth Chertok
Ninotchka.....Hildegarde Neff
Reporters.....Edward Becker, Tony Gardell, Arthur Rubin
Janice Dayton...Gretchen Wyler
Pierre Bouchard..Marcel Hillaire
Chief Commissar..Forrest Green
Saleslady.....Ludie Claire
M. Fabour.....Paul Best
Bookstall Man.....Louis Polacek
Assistant Director...Lee Barry
Sonia.....Devra Kline
Anna.....Alexandra Moss
Musicians.....Maurice Kogan, Leon Merian, Mervin Gold

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

February 25, 1955

'Silk Stockings' Plain Wonderful

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Since "Silk Stockings" is everything a musical should be, its first performance at the Imperial Theatre last evening was worth waiting for—and so will be the tickets to all subsequent performances. It is handsome, slick, brisk, intelligent, witty and delightfully acted, and whenever the plot shows the merest sign of trying to take over more than its share, Cole Porter shoulders it aside with some of his best melodies, lyrics and rhythms.

The book of "Stockings," by George S. Kaufman, Leueen MacGrath and Abe Burrows, is based on Melchior Lengyel's old Garbo movie, "Ninotchka." Since I never saw this epic, not having been a Garbo fan, I can't tell how firmly based it is—but I fancy that the present authors have taken admirable liberties. As the story stands now, a young Russian composer comes to Paris for a concert and is taken over by an American agent. The Commies want their boy to come right home, but the agent won't let him go.

A Lady Commissar

The Kremlin sends three of its own agents to fetch him, but they discover the pleasures of capitalist deviation and they don't try too hard. So a commissar is dispatched—a grim, flat-heeled, fanatical female nicknamed Ninotchka. So what does this babe do when she hits Paris but fall in love with the agent—and with Paris, too, for Porter won't allow anybody in a show who doesn't love Paris.

Readers of theatrical notes have been repeatedly briefed about "Silk Stockings" being kept out of town for weeks and months for "fixing." I don't even know if it needed fixing in the first place, but I do know that the producers, Cy Feuer and Ernest Martin, have finally brought in a beautifully polished job. Under Feuer's direction, everything and everybody moves with split-second precision.

Of course, precision isn't everything. You'd go out of your mind if you had to watch the Rockettes for two hours, and so would they. The fun has to be there, and there is much of it in "Silk Stockings." The jibes at the Commies, swift and pointed, strike home—as when a commissar, wanting to know about somebody, orders an underling to look the party up in "Who's Still Who."

Movies Get It, Too

And it isn't just the Soviets who get a knocking around. Hollywood has it, too, for in the plot is a movie star who has come to make her first serious picture out of water. She has been swimming so much her ears have gone bad and she has to work dry from now on, so she plans an independent production of "War and Peace."

There could not be any more pleasant company in the theatre than Hildegarde Neff as Ninotcha, Don Ameche as the amorous agent and Gretchen Wyler as the curvy film cutie. Miss Neff is a fascinating actress with a slinky, smoky voice, and her singing of "Without Love" is the high point of the show. Miss Wyler knocks the house down with two brassy comedy numbers, "Stereophonic Sound" and "Josephine." Ameche does well with "All of You" and the already-familiar title song, "Silk Stockings."

Jo Mielziner's sets, as they shift between Moscow and Paris, have wit as well as beauty, and Lucinda Ballard's costumes have the same quality. Others of the company, such as Leon Belasco, Henry Lascoe, David Opatoshu and Philip Sterling, will have to wait later for the praise due them, and so will the choristers and Eugene Loring's dancers for such exciting big numbers as "Hail Bibinski" and "The Red Blues."

"Stockings" is wonderful subversive propaganda—on our side.

The New York Times
February 25, 1955

Theatre: Satire on the Soviet

'Silk Stockings' Has Cole Porter Songs

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WE can all afford to relax now. Everything about "Silk Stockings," which opened at the Imperial Thursday evening, represents the best goods in the American musical comedy emporium.

People who remember the Garbo "Ninotchka" may miss its subtlety. But "Silk Stockings" is only "suggested" by "Ninotchka." In place of subtlety, it offers the wittiest dialogue of recent years, Cole Porter's best work and enormous gusto and skill in performance. This is one of Gotham's memorable shows, on a level with "Guys and Dolls."

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A broad satire of Soviet Russia, it is the work of one of our powerful cells—George S. Kaufman, Leueen MacGrath and Abe Burrows. It represents the transformation of a stony-faced female commissar into a romantic woman on the basis of a visit to Paris. As the corrupted commissar — Hildegarde Neff, grim and belligerent, translated into a smiling girl. She gives an immensely skillful performance. As the man of the world whom she comes to love—Don Ameche, the perfect musical comedy hero, crackling in style, deadpan, assured, sardonic.

They give a rousing performance inside a very funny book. And they have the support of a lively cast. Something especially appreciative must be said in honor of Gretchen Wyler. As a shameless Hollywood star, she is brassy and comically abandoned, not to dwell too much on her luscious personality.

Some other folks give extraordinary performances. David Opatoshu, Henry Lascoe and Leon Belasco, as three stolid Russians lost in the flesh-pots of Paris, are hilarious in three distinctive styles of fooling. Under Cy Feuer's expert direction, the whole production rolls boisterously through the evening on a crest of enjoyment.

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As in the most expert musical comedies, everything contributes to the vitality of everything else. The topic of Soviet dialectical earnestness has put Mr. Porter back in his best form. His music, with some clever burlesques of the Russian folk chorus, is bold, ironic and melodious with great variety in form. And his intricately worded lyrics rank with those earlier rhymes of his that have become part of the popular American culture.

No doubt the show follows a formula, if you want to get analytical about it. But the best thing about it is the logic and wit with which the story weaves in and out of the spectacular and the smaller scenes, now and then exploding into the noisy revelry of ballets. They are the work of Eugene Loring, who has staged them with the exuberance that characterizes the whole carnival.

•

The high commissars of the production of "Silk Stockings" have hired experienced talent. Jo Mielziner, for instance, has raced through big rooms and corners of Paris with capacious settings that somehow reflect the broad fun of the central idea. Lucinda Ballard and Robert Mackintosh have designed costumes with a jaunty air. Trust Don Walker, the orchestration man, to blow the tunes through the roof with the blare of the brasses.

The Soviet stage often bears down hard on the peccadillos of bourgeois America. For the sake of enjoyment everywhere, it is to be hoped that their pokes at America are as light-footed and hearty as this humorously tempestuous show.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
February 25, 1955

THEATER

'Silk Stockings'

By WALTER F. KERR

Pot Pourri

AFTER threatening to come into town during the Thanksgiving season, the Christmas season, and the New Year's season, "Silk Stockings" finally decided to give itself up for Lent.

It opened at the Imperial Thursday the end-product of a fabulous out-of-town sortie in which the authors were changed, the directors were changed, the choreographers were changed, and the changes were changed. Of the gallant little band that sailed into rehearsal last October, many brave hearts are now asleep in the deep.

What has been wrought in all this travail? Well, not a miracle, certainly. But not precisely a clambake, either.

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Right off the top there's an especially vivacious Cole Porter score. This musical comedy vision of Greta Garbo's old film, "Ninotchka," isn't an easy show to move: it's topheavy with dialogue, slow to dance, and terribly concerned with the ideology of a Russian-American love affair. But Mr. Porter pretends not to notice. The curtain is no sooner up than he's having tongue-in-cheek fun with the problem of getting Russians who have known Paris to care about that return trip to Moscow ("Too Bad"), and for a second-act opener he's able to give a Left-Bank lift to an unpromising idea called "Hail, Bibinski." The composer is going to pace this show or split our ears in the effort—and he brings off these tempo-blasts wonderfully.

Mr. Porter is, indeed, a Good Samaritan everywhere. He provides Don Ameche and Hildegarde Neff with an amiably erratic little duet in which the gentleman, relaxed on a capitalist sofa, hymns the glories of Paris while the lady, rigid on hard wood, ticks off a proletarian criticism of every melodic line. He offers the international lovers several standard but sweet and happily uncomplicated ballads—"All of You," "Without Love," and "As On Through the Seasons We Sail"—and I found myself particularly impressed by the sly ease with which he brightened up a routine film star-reporter session (the gal slips into a rhapsody to stereophonic sound). It should be added that Don Walker has given all of this the very best orchestration.

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Handling these songs, and handling them suavely, are three apparently secure and altogether ingratiating people. Mr. Ameche is a decided find—if he can be called that at this juncture—for the musical comedy stage. Possessed of a penetrating show-baritone that plugs a song handsomely, and of an easy-going authority that is never smug, he leers, scowls, smirks, and furrows those pyramiding eyebrows with great good humor. He can look as though he's listening to some one else sing, too—no mean achievement.

Miss Neff's voice is a throaty gasp, and it's carefully confined to some workable patter stuff, but the actress is appealing in her initial green slicker, mousy bun, and coarse black stockings—and dazzling when she exchanges the outfit for some eye-filling scarlet.

Third in line, but stopping the show on several occasions, is a platinum-haired looker named Gretchen Wyler. Miss Wyler has a fetchingly imbecilic way about her, and while I felt that her major explosion ("Josephine") left her gyrating to mere noise, I found myself enchanted with her various efforts to bang water out of her ear and to cope with a halibut-type brain. Others in the company who are resolutely cheerful include Henry Lascoe, David Opatoshu, George Tobias and Julie Newmar.

The lot of them work before clean, colorful backdrops from the hand of Jo Mielziner, and quite a bit of the time they have reasonably shrewd jokes—from the hand of George S. Kaufman, Leueen McGrath, or Abe Burrows—to flip lightly over the footlights.

And what do all these pleasantries add up to? A piece of show-making of no very clearly defined character. "Silk Stockings" has, for instance, almost no dances at all, and it frequently lags for the lack of them. It has a story that burns itself out before the end of the first act, but goes on talking regardless. It has colorful production detail in fits and starts, but the fits and the starts rarely make a pattern.

The Messrs. Feuer and Martin have, then, stitched together a piece of merchandise for the commercial traveler.

If "Can-Can" can, I rather imagine "Silk Stockings" will.

Journal American

February 25, 1955

Hail Ameche In Musical

He's Big New Star All Over Again; Hildegarde Neff Called Enchanting

By JOHN McCLAIN

ONE ITEM should be recorded at the outset of any consideration of "Silk Stockings," the new Cole Porter musical which opened at the Imperial Theatre last night. That is that Don Ameche is a big new star all over again; at long last here is a leading man who can sing without posing and flinging his arms about, who can read a line in an entirely natural manner, whose performance is unostentatious and charming.

Another item is that Hildegarde Neff is a fresh and enchanting addition to the local roster. She can't sing a lick, but she doesn't have to; she makes with a throaty moan at proper intervals, like Grandma Dietrich, and her natural grace and earthy appeal carry the evening.

For the evening needs a heap of carrying. This is by no means a great Cole Porter score; there is nothing spectacular in the way of choreography or staging, and the George Kaufman-Leueen MacGrath-Abe Burrows libretto often coughs and sputters in the clinch. But the materials at hand are proven and solid, we learned to love Ameche and Neff, and as a result we come away gratified.

None of the recent events in Russia will dilute the plot, which has been broadly adapted from "Ninotchka," Garbo's valedictory to the cinema world: a dedicated Russian girl is dispatched from Moscow to bring home a Soviet composer who has been too long absent in Paris.

There she meets an American agent who has attached himself to the Communist genius, falls in love with him and discovers the delights of such reactionary items as silk gowns and champagne. Her idyll is of course cut short with a sudden awakening in the middle of the second act. But never fear—love triumphs in the end.

A Peel Number

Along this Franco-Soviet highway there are many hilarious moments. Three Russian envoys, played by Henry Lascoe, Leon Belasco and David Opatoshu milk the last dregs from the situation confronting a set of comrades who are loathe to return to the Utopia behind the Iron Curtain. They are loathe, in fact, to retire behind any curtain.

And George Tobias chucks in a bright bit as a Commissar.

The numbers between Neff (Ninotchka) and Ameche (the agent) are uniformly delightful, the best being "All of You" and "As On Through the Seasons We Sail."

A girl named Gretchen Wyler, new to Broadway, plays the part of an American movie queen and stops the proceedings with a mild peel number called "Josephine." She also contributes intermittent laughs with an ingenious piece of business: it seems she's been an aquatic star in pictures, and whenever she's stuck for something to say she belts her head to get the water out of her ears.

On the other hand there are long slow sequences in the story, talky and infrequently amusing, and the large production numbers lacked distinction. I thought the sets were pleasant, certainly not lavish or exciting—the costumes likewise.

None-the-less "Silk Stockings" has the old professional polish and timing—it always moves. People were saying the show was in terrible trouble on the road, where it made nothing but money. Well, it may not be perfection in its present form, but my prediction is that it will only make more money.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 25, 1955

'Silk Stockings' Puts Soviet Gloom on Pan

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Silk Stockings." The new musical at the Imperial, has its moments. Most of the time, though, it behaves like a horse that does not know which way to run.

Perhaps the wit and charm of the wonderful picture "Ninotchka" were never adaptable to an outsize musical. At any rate, one's attitude about Soviet humorlessness and stubbornness has changed.

Gloom Dispelled.

Toward the end, there is a sequence in which the Russians who have visited Paris stage a jazz ball in their barracks. Suddenly the whole affair takes light and becomes exuberant. Previous to this, the story has been one of people bringing gloom to a gay place instead of gaiety to a gloomy one.

As in the picture, a famed young Russian composer makes a hit in Paris. The officials sent to check up on him fall hard for the city.

Then comes Ninotchka, hardened lady commissar. Instead of making her fellow nationals toe the party line, she falls in love. In the end, she returns home. But her American beau turns up in Moscow in time to save her.

The Porter songs nestle close to your ear. Lots more will be heard of "Paris Loves Lovers," "All of You," "Without Love" and "Silk Stockings."

Lady of Quality.

Hildegarde Neff—in the central role—is a unique personality, interesting-looking rather than a beauty and possessed of a voice deeper and flatter than Dietrich's. Unquestionably she has quality.

Don Ameche, as a theatrical agent, is a clean-cut stage figure with a pleasant singing voice and a sharp delivery for comedy lines.

Comedy relief is suggested in the character of a swimming movie star, played by Gretchen Wyler. She is a handsome, hefty blonde with a piercing voice and willful abandon.

George Tobias has some fine funny moments as the commissar of art, and the rebellious trio of travelers is delightfully played by Henry Lascoe, Leon Belasco and David Opatoshu.

Joe Mielziner and Lucinda Ballard have designed sets and costumes for so many lovely shows that it is a surprise to find their Paris so drab.

New York Post

February 25, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Kidding the Muscovites to Music

Out of "Ninotchka," a celebrated motion picture that kidded the Russians amusingly and provided the incomparable Greta Garbo with one of her most notable roles, some talented theater people have made an entertaining musical comedy called "Silk Stockings," which opened last night at the Imperial. Here following a tumultuous road tour and apparently quite a bit of intramural battling, it turned out to be a vigorous, tuneful and often hilariously satirical show, which gives every sign of being a hit and, in most part, deserves to be.

On a few occasions, particularly in the second act, the book tends to grow a little serious about Soviet dogmatism and tyranny, as if slightly fearful of its general good nature. Chiefly, though, it keeps its anti-Muscovite lampooning remarkably on a pleasant level of humorous amiability, and I think it is all the more effective because of its lack of spluttering indignation. Some of its thrusts are pointed and telling, especially because "Silk Stockings" keeps its temper. It would be cheering to think an anti-American show in Moscow could be so unhysterical.

The Agent

Indeed, the new musical comedy doesn't hesitate to glance in the direction of a few local targets, too. It manages to find time to laugh at Hollywood movie stars and the antics of our filmmakers abroad, and it even reveals a considerable courage in taking for its American hero, the man who combats the totalitarians and wins the serious-minded Russian girl over to democratic gaiety and freedom, a Hollywood actors' agent. Here is a vulnerable national type for mockery, if ever I heard of one. The second act, by the way, does fall off somewhat.

This libretto, which, unless my memory has faltered more than usual, has been pretty freely adapted from Melchior Lengyel's film scenario, is the work of George S. Kaufman, Leueen MacGrath and Abe Burrows, all three of whom are notable for their sense of intelligent humor. The fun in "Silk Stockings," which is often witty and pungently pertinent, is more the result of dialogue than situation. The plot, you may recall, has to do with three nitwit commissars who are sent to Paris to watch a Russian composer, and the girl who is sent to watch them.

The Score

Cole Porter's score is naturally one of the features of the evening, and it reveals the celebrated composer in excellent and characteristic form, both as a song writer and as a lyricist. On first hearing, my impression is that the most engaging numbers are the ones called "Paris Loves Lovers," "All of You," "Without Love" and a good comic song known as "Stereophonic Sound." The music sounds fine right now, and Mr. Porter's work is famous and remarkable for improving with familiarity. There isn't much dancing, but Eugene Loring has staged it well.

Hildegarde Neff, a film star from Germany, faces the immense task of having the Garbo role, and everybody's old friend, Don Ameche, is the agent. I thought both of them handled their assignments pleasantly. David Opatoshu, Leon Belasco and Henry Lascoe, the comic commissars, and Philip Sterling, the Soviet composer, are especially good, and a newcomer named Gretchen Wyler scores a large-sized personal hit as the Hollywood actress. Jo Mielziner's sets are, of course, of great help. "Silk Stockings" doesn't always live up to its best moments but it is good, tuneful fun.

"The Dark Is Light Enough"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 24, 1955

Fry's Wit Challenge to Cast

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Christopher Fry's "The Dark Is Light Enough" is an exotic drama at the ANTA Theater.

It tells a strange love story, set in the Hungarian revolution against the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1848.

This love is neither romantic nor passionate, but is based on need and usefulness. The older woman is a true sophisticate. She is witty and, above all, merciful. She has a sense of proportion which lets her admit her mistakes with gay assurance.

The man is bitter, shifting, vengeful and uncertain. He loves the woman with need, because she is a rock, for all her delicacy. She cares for him impersonally, as one more unit of humanity that deserves freedom.

Helps Hide Him.

This older Countess has had no good of the man, who was once briefly her son-in-law. Yet she hides him from the Army he deserted. She protects him, at the price of the liberty of her present son-in-law.

Later she does the same thing, when the tide of war has turned, to his pursuer. With her death, she forces the coward who needed her to make a courageous decision for the first time.

The script rides on the brink of obscurity most of the time. Fry abhors a simple statement of fact. He writes poetically, rich with metaphors, allusions, and a flowery tinkle of words.

His characters have a certain gallantry of breeding which makes them flippant on the surface, when they are actually most disturbed. His witticisms should zing past your ears like crystal needles from a blowgun, sounding their best after they have passed.

Not Up to Glitter.

The present company rarely has the elegance and precise invention to give the Fry lines the glitter they need.

Katharine Cornell plays the Countess with a weary gentleness as she literally breathes her last strength into this personal struggle for the freedom of man.

Tyrone Power is the younger weak egotist who depends so on the Countess.

Of the rest of the cast no one is so successful as John Williams at capturing the caustic lilt of Mr. Fry's writing.

Christopher Plummer has vigor and graceful speech as the present son-in-law. As his wife, Marian Winters is sensitive and tender.

Arnold Moss is direct and ascetic as the invading Colonel.

"The Dark Is Light Enough" suffered a great disadvantage in the delay caused by Mr. Power's illness, on the eve of its New York opening. This may understandably have drained out of the performance some of its yeastiness which can be recaptured.

"THE DARK IS LIGHT ENOUGH"

Play by Christopher Fry; staged by Guthrie McClintic; settings and costumes by Oliver Messel; presented by Katharine Cornell and Roger L. Stevens by arrangement with H. M. Tennent, Ltd., at the ANTA Theatre, February 23, 1955.

Kassel.....William Podmore
Jakob.....Donald Harron
Belmann.....John Williams
Stefan.....Paul Roebling
Bella.....Eva Condon
Willi.....Charles Macaulay
Gelda.....Marian Winters
Richard Gettner...Tyrone Power
Countess Rosmarin Ostenburg..
Katharine Cornell
Colonel Janik.....Arnold Moss
Count Peter Zichy.....
Christopher Plummer
Beppy.....Ted Gunther
Rusti.....Sydney Pollack
Third Soldier....Jerome Gardino
Fourth Soldier.....Dario Barri

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

February 24, 1955

'Dark Is Light Enough' Is Murky

By JOHN CHAPMAN

For Katharine Cornell's new play, "The Dark Is Light Enough," Oliver Messel has designed three wonderful settings, all full of twists and doodads and curlicues, depicting an Austro-Hungarian country house in the middle of the last century. For the play itself, poet Christopher Fry has devised three not-so-wonderful acts, full of twists and doodads and curlicues, but containing little excitement. At one point in the drama, a character remarks, "The language is full of yes no and no yes." Amen.

Ever a lover of costume drama, Miss Cornell has seen to it that everything and everybody is richly caparisoned. Her leading man, Tyrone Power, looks like the Chocolate Soldier—and his role is not unlike that of Shaw's rascally warrior; but Shaw wrote it more clearly and with sharper wit. I am not at all clear in my mind concerning what Fry is driving at, but sometimes he sounds like warmed-over Oscar Wilde, as in "It would be easier to love you than like you."

A Lovely Countess

Anyhow, Miss Cornell, very regal and very lovely, is a countess who has the rococo home. The Hungarians have rebelled against the Austrians, and her house seems to be a meeting place—particularly when she has her Thursday at-homes—for both sides. So the stage is usually full of people, and most of the people stand around most of the time waiting for somebody else to stop talking. This takes time, for the drama is in unrhymed verse.

When Power is doing the talking, "The Dark Is Light Enough" does become alive, for he is a handsome, vigorous actor with one of the best and clearest voices on the stage today. But even what he says strikes me as being vague, so he didn't offer me much guidance in groping my way through a plot of indescribable complexity at last evening's premier at the ANTA Theatre.

A Colorful Cast.

There are other colorful performances—if not helpful—by John Williams, Arnold Moss, Marian Winters and Christopher Plummer. Helene Pons has done some fine costumes, particularly the gowns for the imperial Miss Cornell.

The dark may be light enough for Mr. Fry and all the actors and actresses at the ANTA Theatre, but I don't think I'd be able to find my way through the drama with a Seeing Eye dog. This may be due to my own mental blindness, of course. I even flunked math in college, and my English profs never could get me to read anything highfalutin.

Journal American
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Fry Drama Lacks Action

Katharine Cornell Radiant; Tyrone Power Assured

By JOHN McCLAIN

AT some point toward the end of the first act of "The Dark Is Light Enough," which opened at the ANTA Theatre last night, I had a sudden, blinding delusion that I was in Madame Tussaud's waxworks.

There was Katharine Cornell, real as life; and Tyrone Power, and John Williams and several other actors I'd seen many times. They were carefully arranged in center stage, like a group photograph, and from some place was coming a sound track with a lot of words by Christopher Fry.

The words of Mr. Fry were good words, and they droned on relentlessly, building one on the other in a plea for pacifism, the brotherhood of man, and a series of minor matters closely associated with the characters. This is stylized and this is good, I said to myself, and pretty soon somebody will throw the switch and these figures will come to life and do something.

On and On . . .

But unfortunately, this never happened. The characters continued to posture and declaim, the words ebbed and flowed around them, but to the bitter end they remained static and secure in their restful Victorian surroundings.

There will be many interpretations of what Christopher Fry was trying to say, but there should be a solidarity of opinion on the fact that he takes an almost endless time doing it.

An Austrian Countess harbors a rebel officer in her house during the Hungarian Revolution of 1848-9. He had been married to her daughter, it develops, although the girl has since wed a Hungarian in the Austrian Army.

We are thus projected into something resembling an American Civil War melodrama, but with infinitely less action. In the fading stanza of the evening somebody says, "Wars only change anxieties," which is a fair condensation of several hundred preceeding speeches. One leaves the premises re-dedicated to the fact that bloodshed is useless, and that playwrights, however talented, cannot always substitute speech for action.

Miss Cornell, as ever radiant, is a warm and comprehending figure around whom the play revolves; it is she who, like a butterfly, goes forward through the night..."without hesitation...and arrives in a state of perfect freshness... the dark is light enough."

Meaning, I guess, that she perseveres in her dedication to tolerance. It is regrettable only that they didn't give us more exciting incidents of her flight.

Tyrone Power, certainly in our top cadre of young actors, delivers his lines with strength and assurance, projects brilliantly his characterization of the bewildered Austrian who has sought solace in a cause, and repented. But he too finds himself caught in the same time-exposure, his neck fixed in a vise, as the dialogue rolls on.

The supporting cast is uniformly excellent: John Williams, Donald Harron, Arnold Moss, Marian Winters, Eva Condon, William Podmore, Christopher Plummer and Paul Roebling.

Oliver Messel provides us with a sumptuous Hungarian country house living room and stable to match. Guthrie McClintic has directed with his usual ease and understanding but, in this case, an uncommon reverence for the words of the author.

For the followers of Fry there are many scenes and passages of worth, but little would be lost if the same cast had performed the show on the radio.

New York Post

February 24, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Christopher Fry Thinks It Over

There is nothing commonplace about Christopher Fry, and that is a great comfort. There is a fine capacity for eloquence in him, too, and that also deserves commendation. He likewise possesses a pretty wit, sharp and epigrammatic, when he feels like using it, and this, I think, merits not only approval but encouragement. All of these high virtues are present in his "winter comedy" called "The Dark Is Light Enough," which opened last night at the ANTA Theater, but, despite these qualities that I so admire, I still find myself unable to like his new play.

I can't help feeling now about "The Dark Is Light Enough" as I did when I saw it in London last summer, that it reveals virtues turned into defects, that it shows its author so bemused by the impressive sound of his own words that he has become pretentious, ponderous, even a bit pompous. The grace and frequent beauty of his imagery and the subtle implications of his brooding philosophical contemplation have somehow drained away all emotion and dramatic forcefulness. Only in the third act, I think, does the play come momentarily to theatrical life.

Hungary, 1848

For the background of his narrative, Mr. Fry has taken the Hungarian Revolution against Austria in 1848, conceivably on the theory that it is the revolt on which audiences of today can look with the greatest amount of equanimity. So far as plot outline goes, the play is concerned with the efforts of a tolerant and understanding countess to save from a rebel firing squad a worthless and ungrateful deserter who had been briefly married to her daughter. If you know your Christopher Fry, though, you'll realize that he has other things on his mind.

What they are, I'm not sure I can set down in any manner that will satisfy either the author, himself, or any other playgoer or reader of the text. I can well believe that there might be a dozen interpretations of the work's basic meaning, each one valid to the person propounding it. I can only offer my own guess, frankly confessing that it is nothing else. I believe Mr. Fry is providing another parable of the competition between Good and Evil, or, at least, of tolerance, compassion and understanding against selfishness, cynicism and callousness.

The Countess

Mr. Fry's countess is the foe of cruelty, hatred, destruction and all that would destroy decency and graciousness. If her chief antagonist is the man she saves from death, her opposition is by no means confined to him. Sympathizing with both the rebellious Hungarians and their Austrian foes, she is against both of them when they fall back on violence and intolerance. I guess she might even be called a neutralist or a third force. And it appears to be the author's faith that some of her goodness will in the end infect others. I merely wish he were more dramatic in saying so.

As the playwright's protagonist, Katharine Cornell offers one of her loveliest and most gracious performances. Tyrone Power, an excellent actor, is impressively forthright in the curiously unsatisfactory and equivocal role of the deserter. In addition, there are especially good portrayals by Arnold Moss as a Hungarian officer, Christopher Plummer as a young man of good will, and the unfailing John Williams as a friend of the family. Marian Winters can't be blamed for keeping the daughter rather an obscure figure. Oliver Messel has contributed two of his fine sets. But Mr. Fry's play is lost in its own words.

The New York Times

February 24, 1955

Theatre: Miss Cornell in 'Dark Is Light Enough'

Christopher Fry Play Opens at the ANTA

By BROOKS ATKINSON

KATHARINE CORNELL has found a good part in a heavy play, Christopher Fry's "The Dark Is Light Enough," acted at the ANTA Theatre last evening.

At least, it seems like a good part. For Miss Cornell plays it with the regality, kindness and nobility of her best art. With theatricality, too, let us add. She is the essence of theatre in the grand manner. In the most lavish part she has had for years, she gives an admirable performance.

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"The Dark Is Light Enough" is set in an Austrian country house in the winter of 1848-49 during a futile uprising of the Hungarians against Austrian rule. The play is concerned with the impact this rebellion has on the inhabitants of the house. Foremost among them is the countess—an eminent lady of wit, independence, compassion and honesty. At the bottom of the heap is a highly intelligent scoundrel with no character at all.

Apart from several other well-drawn people, representing either amusing worldliness or earnest convictions, the play concentrates on the ordeal of the countess' conscience. Although she is above petty acrimonies, although she overflows with forgiveness, she is grievously hurt by the callousness of the scoundrel's unprincipled behavior. She dies in the last scene.

As a poet, Mr. Fry is a gifted phrase-maker — very witty at times. "The Dark Is Light Enough" is written in elaborate style, and the character of the countess acquires stature from the writing. But Mr. Fry, a mystic, leaves a good deal of his play in obscurity. The motivations of some of his characters are puzzling.

Even the theme is a nebulous one. As he develops as a poetic dramatist, Mr. Fry becomes increasingly involved in thought processes and intricate expression. Like "Venus Observed," "The Dark Is Light Enough" moves in the direction of private art. It is vexed with spiritual and dramatic secrets.

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Believing in the literary distinction of the play, Guthrie McClintic has given it the careful and opulent production common to all the Cornell works. Oliver Messel has designed the country house with his customary splendor—curving staircase, rococo lamps, elegant furniture. And the costumes for the ladies are great, flaring creations that look like theatre; and the costumes for the men are colorful, also.

Tyrone Power, who is costarred with Miss Cornell, gives a forthright, vigorous performance in a negative part. For Richard Gettner represents the evil that destroys even the noble ones, or perhaps the evil that evokes nobility from his betters. It is a graceless role, unredeemed by wit, brilliance or cleverness. It is greatly to Mr. Powers' credit that he can give it such a solid performance.

Among those present is John Williams, playing with insouciance and humor—a tower of strength to the group performance. Marian Winters acts the countess' daughter with affecting submission. Arnold Moss' crispness and energy in the part of an anxious army officer sharpen the ethical conflicts of the drama.

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Christopher Plummer as a courageous son-in-law with a sense of principle; Eva Condon as a motherly servant; Paul Roebling as a gentle, apprehensive son; William Podmore as a sharp-witted doctor; Donald Harron as a hot-headed friend of the family — give carefully detailed, professional performances.

What shines, however, is Miss Cornell's limpid, civilized acting. For "The Dark Is Light Enough" is a literary exercise — somber in tone and labyrinthian in thought, despite its high-minded attitude toward life. In his early plays Mr. Fry wrote for the theatre. He is writing for posterity now, and not with much passion or enthusiasm.